



Chapter 3

First Balloon Ride

It was a powder puff day. The balloons had floated gently off the launch site in ones and twos and scattered in all directions, depending on the flying altitude the pilot had picked. Several were already starting to work their way back toward the launch site.

"Today you just might get a turn," Judy said.

"That'd sure be fun," I answered and ducked my head down in order to see Snap Dragon through the windshield. "I think we'll just wait a while to see which way she is going."

"You want a cup of coffee while we wait?"

"Sure," I said and crawled out of the cab. We leaned on the side of the pickup, sipping coffee and munching on sweet rolls. Snap Dragon floated lazily in the sky hardly moving.

As I leaned there I thought about how hot air balloon flying had turned out to be different than I had first imagined. The usual flying time was around one to three hours. A lot depended on weather, temperature, wind direction, passenger loads, etc. Even though we had occasionally chased the balloon several miles, the fun in ballooning was usually not measured in distances. The really good days were those when the pilot could play with the wind currents at different altitudes and take the balloon several different directions in the course of a two to three hour flight. If the ground winds were also very gentle the balloon could make pinpoint landings where the basket settled to the ground like a feather. It was supposed to feel like landing on a powder puff.

"Look! He just picked up the same wind current Ziggy Star Dust has," Laurlie called from the back of the pickup.

"Good, that means he wants to go down over the bluffs and play around in the arroyos."

"It looks like most of the rest are headed the same way," Kevin observed.

I checked the rest of the sky and, sure enough, several other balloons had ascended into the same air stream and were headed after Ziggy Star Dust. I turned the truck down the road to the valley, pulled off on a side road about a half-mile ahead, and watched the movement of the balloons in the sky. They all seemed to be moving in slow motion and generally in the same direction. Ziggy dropped into an arroyo and across the desert I could hear the laughter from her crew.

Powder puff days were always fun for the chase crews. Soft winds usually meant the balloon would be able to land several times and change passengers. On the other hand, the changing wind directions meant the chase crew driver had to be on his toes to be able to anticipate where the balloon was going to land, and get there far enough ahead so the crew could be waiting at just the right spot to steady the basket. Sometimes this meant I had to send people running madly across the desert to catch up with the balloon while I tried to find a way across a gully.

When we had first joined the chase crew George had told us there were two ways we could get a ride in the balloon. We could pay for a ride. George took up an occasional paying passenger, but most of his flying was recreational. The other way to get a ride was to be a regular member of the chase crew. This meant coming out several mornings and learning the skills of launching, chasing, and packing up a balloon. After we were on the chase crew about four to five times, it would be our turn to ride.

At first we had come out mainly to try to earn a ride, but by the time we had chased Snap Dragon several mornings, we looked forward to everything from the launching to the pickup and the picnic afterward. So far Judy, Laurlie, Kevin and Philip had gotten to ride, but I still was waiting my turn. Deep down I wasn't even sure I wanted to go. I was having a lot of fun just chasing a balloon, but the thought of flying in

one made my stomach churn. I couldn't decide whether the feeling was excitement or fear.

"It looks like George is going to try for the road that crosses the top of the hill," Judy said from the seat beside me. We had been chasing for about an hour.

"OK," I said, "I think there is a crossroad just about 100 yards up this way."

I turned the pickup down the crossroad and gunned it through a strip of sand while the crew in the back yelled with glee as the back end fishtailed. We pulled up as Snap Dragon drifted slowly toward the road and touched down. The balloon took one short hop and then settled gracefully in the middle of the road. I could see by the look on George's face he was thinking, "Damn! I'm good!" and he was.

"OK, Cal, it's your turn," he called.

My heart jumped. I bailed out of the pickup and almost fell on my nose in my rush to get to the balloon. George chuckled and shook his head. We changed passengers carefully. I swung my legs over the side of the basket and slid into the gondola. George told one of the other passengers to step out. Then my son Philip was asked to get in. The same procedure was followed. One got in before the other got out.

George began giving us our flight instructions. "Do whatever the pilot tells you. When we land, always face the direction the balloon is going and bend your legs. This thing doesn't have shock absorbers. Hang on to the uprights and brace yourself."

Now folks! I am one of those people that you can't get to ride the ferris wheel at the carnival for love nor money. I also don't like looking over the railing of a bridge. Here I was in an overgrown flower basket and about to be hauled into the sky by a bunch of flimsy fabric and hot air. As if that weren't enough, now I was getting instructions on how to crash.

"When the balloon lands, you don't get out until I tell you specifically to get out," George continued. "If you do and I go screaming off into the sky, you are going to hear cuss words you have never heard before."

I tightened my grip on the upright, tried to look nonchalant, and thought about the folly of my ways. George turned on the burner and bounced several times to test the buoyancy

of the balloon. Butterflies welled up in my stomach and I licked my dry lips with an even drier tongue.

"Maybe we've got too much weight and I'll be asked to get out," I thought. "Really, that idea doesn't sound too bad. How did I ever get myself into this jam anyway? Oh Lord! Don't let me get sick."

As I watched with growing apprehension, very slowly the ground seemed to float down and away from the balloon. I had expected the lift-off to feel like going up in an elevator but instead it seemed like the balloon was standing still and the ground was moving away. Judy, Kevin and Laurlie waved to me and I found myself letting go of the upright and waving back. "Hey! This is fun." Soon we were high above the desert and a quiet surrounded us like I had never experienced before. George looked at me and Philip and grinned, but no one said anything.

Other balloons were scattered out around us—some on the desert floor below us and several at various altitudes around us. They looked different from above, much like huge colorful flowers from some strange planet. Even the desert took on different hues and colors at this altitude. In the distance I could see the mountains surrounding the Rio Grande Valley. I identified several mountains I knew were over 100 miles away.

Finally George broke the silence, "This quiet is one of the nicest things about ballooning."

As I listened carefully, there were sounds, but they were all distant sounds. We could hear the burners firing on the other balloons. It was almost like the balloons were living animals talking to each other. An occasional sound drifted up from the ground. We could hear the rattle of a pickup banging along the rough road and laughter carried like the distant ringing of bells.

George would fire the burner on Snap Dragon to maintain our altitude and then the silence would rush back in, to surround us like a comfortable blanket between us and the other world. The gondola creaked as someone shifted his weight and there was the quiet hiss of the pilot light. It took me several minutes to spot what was really missing. On the ground you are constantly surrounded by sounds that the movement of air makes or by the natural sounds around you. Up here, all these

sounds were eliminated and there was just you and the balloon sounds.

I looked down and realized things didn't look far away as much as they looked miniaturized. Strangely, any fear of heights was gone. Of course, I had no desire to sit on the edge of the gondola like George was doing, but I felt quite comfortable and secure. I asked George about this.

"It's the effect of moving with the wind," he said. "The stillness of the air that surrounds the balloon makes it feel like the ground is moving under you and the balloon is standing still."

It was much like watching a scene in a movie except this movie was three-dimensional and all around us. The huge multicolored envelope above us was the only thing that did not move.

"Let's go down and ground track for a while," George said.

As the balloon cooled we dropped out of the sky. At first it didn't seem like we were falling very fast, but soon things on the ground seemed to be growing bigger at an alarming rate. I wasn't about to say anything to George, but I had visions of being splattered on the ground like a watermelon falling off the back of a truck. Just when things were really looking serious he gave a series of blasts on the burner and stopped the balloon neatly about two feet from the ground.

"I don't usually do that with first timers," he grinned, "but I thought you might like to see how it feels to come down fast."

"Thanks a lot," I said letting out the breath I had been holding. "Any faster and you would have had a mess to clean up in the bottom of the gondola."

We were in a series of gullies and small hills covered with brush and cactus and an occasional piñon tree. Ground tracking is simply skimming with the balloon just above the ground or barely clearing the trees. We climbed up out of a gully and slid over the top of a hill and then slipped down the other side. George's feather-light control of the balloon made it seem effortless, and the smoothness of the movement of the balloon was in sharp contrast to the roughness of the country we were traversing. I thought about the many bone jarring trips I had made over the same kind of country in the pickup.

I discovered smells had also returned. The scent of piñon is not strong but after our sojourn up in the sky I could pick it out. We drifted across a road and the pickup passed by. I could smell the acrid odor of the dust kicked up off the dry road. As we flew on there was also a strange mixture of smells that must have been made up of many plants. An occasional fragrance would stand out, but soon these all faded together as I settled back into the real world.

A rabbit charged out from under a bush and ran down a gully, throwing spurts of sand. Phil laughed. I was amazed at how little we talked. We would point out things like a clump of flowers or perhaps warn of a tree coming up, but other than that we just shared the bond of the quiet flight and the desert.

Finally George picked out another road and we landed gently in the middle of it. The crew was waiting to grab the gondola.

"How did you like it?" Laurlie bubbled. She had ridden the week before.

"Great," I said, "just great."

"Your eyeballs were as big as saucers when you took off," Kevin said.

"Yeah, but you had a grin on your face you couldn't have wiped off with a scoop shovel," Judy said and gave me a hug.

"Well, you know the first ride is free," George said, "and the second one costs 10,000 dollars."

He was referring to the fact that many people start out just to chase and then get so involved they buy their own balloon.

"He might just be right," I thought.